

The reception committee “Histoire Culturelle : représentations et modes de contact” of the University of Reims / Champagne-Ardenne organized the colloquium “Inform, Create, Govern: Some Functions of Correspondence Over the Ages” from 22 to 24 October 2003.

Representing the Comité pour l’histoire de La Poste, Sébastien Richez presented the following paper “A Material Go-Between for Correspondence: Development of the French Mailbox from the 17th to the 19th Century” (“Un intermédiaire matériel à la correspondance : les Français et la boîte aux lettres, XVII^e-XIX^e siècle”)

Abstract:

More discreet than a phone booth, less visible than a railway, the mailbox occupies a highly significant place among the material infrastructures of written communication. Its diminutive size masks a history spanning several centuries that may be divided into three significant moments of cultural change in French society.

At first mailboxes were placed within a wall of each post office; the very first one appeared in 1567, when the first post office was opened in Paris. By 1704 there were fewer than eight hundred post offices and as many mailboxes within the city; they served as receptacles for the mail of the well-to-do who could afford to send correspondence beyond the city walls. The first innovation coincided with the rising need to handle the mail *intra muros*. The Petite Poste appeared in Paris in 1653; the name was taken from the mailboxes scattered throughout the streets of Paris that collected the mail that remained in the city, as opposed to the mailbox at the main post office – “la grande Poste” – used for *extra muros* mail. This system soon collapsed but was reconstituted in Paris in 1753 and then extended to the major cities of the realm. Regardless of its size, the mailbox was originally a convenience at the disposal of a few privileged urban dwellers.

The end of the first third of the 19th century signaled a radical revolution. Intended primarily for city use, the mailbox became more democratic and enriched every French municipality as part of rural services; in 1830 more than 35,000 mailboxes were set up in villages throughout France. Thanks to the effort of the postal administration, every French citizen had access to this material intermediary for written correspondence. This innovation coincided with a rise in social interaction around the mailbox, now conceived as an iconic ramification of the State’s presence on the local level; it represented the extended domestication of a symbolic object that everyone was still not capable of using.

By the end of the 19th century, the mailbox had been completely assimilated by the French. Having become “à la mode,” it appeared in various sizes, colors, and installations, adorning means of transportation (trains and highway transports) and invading public places (train stations, hotels, and businesses). Since the post office was experiencing budgetary restrictions at the time, this increase was primarily due to individuals who would “rent” the installation and service of the mailbox from the postal administration. The golden age of the mailbox was interrupted by the First World War.